

Utopia Aborted: May '68 in the Philosophy of Guy Hocquenghem

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Since the much-trumpeted appearance in the late 1980s of Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman's imposing two-volume chronicle, *Génération*, there has been a steady stream of autobiographical, semi-autobiographical, and literary accounts of the events of May '68 and the years of revolutionary fermentation that followed.¹ The French '68 generation, it seems, is racing to write its own history. As is always the case when collective memory is codified into history, innumerable episodes, ideas, and people fall by the wayside. Among May's forgotten philosopher-militants, perhaps none is more neglected today than Guy Hocquenghem. A leader of the student movements in 1968, a pioneer of the sexual revolution in the 1970s, and a lifelong critic of French society and polemist of his compatriots, Guy Hocquenghem published some twenty books and literally hundreds of articles in his short lifetime; he died of AIDS-related illnesses in 1988 at the age of forty-one. Most of his works, however, are forgotten and out of print, and in the growing mass of historical and social scientific literature on the '68 generation, he usually

¹ Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Génération* (Paris: Seuil, 1988). Other representative '68 memoirs include Robert Linhart's classic *L'Etabli* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1978), and Olivier Rollin's recent bestseller, *Tigre en papier* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

surfaces only in a handful of footnotes, when he surfaces at all.² It would be impossible to do justice here to his rich and complex intellectual and political itinerary.³ My modest aim instead is to situate and describe the utopian critical perspective that set him apart from his generation after the collective dream of revolution dissipated and that, no doubt, has contributed in some way to his marginalization in recent French collective memory.

Though Guy Hocquenghem's career as a militant and writer began, like many in his generation, in the occupied Latin Quarter in the first weeks of May '68—by his own account he literally threw the first stone on the rue Guy Lussac⁴—most would date his entrance into the public sphere to January 1972, when he published his so-called "coming out" essay in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, entitled the "Revolution of Homosexuals." It was the literary event that, probably more than any single other, helped establish the cause of gay liberation firmly in the wider public consciousness. That same year saw the publication of his manifesto, *Homosexual Desire*, the first philosophical elaboration of the new revolutionary homosexual

² In Jean-Pierre Le Goff, *Mai 68, l'héritage impossible* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002) and Bernard Brillant, *Les Clercs de 68* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2003), to cite two recent examples, Hocquenghem is not mentioned at all.

³ For a more detailed treatment of Hocquenghem that focuses on his critique of French radical leftism after 1968, see Ron Haas, "Guy Hocquenghem and the Cultural Revolution in France after May 1968," in *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on the Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France*, ed. Julian Bourg, afterword by François Dosse (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2004), 175-99.

⁴ My many thanks to Douglas Ireland for this and countless other anecdotes.

movement in France and his most well known work today.⁵ Since 1972, Hocquenghem's name has been almost synonymous in France with the early years of gay liberation and, more specifically, with the Revolutionary Homosexual Action Front (Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire or FHAR), the movement he helped build in the early 1970s. Exaggerating only slightly, one might say that Guy Hocquenghem was to French gay liberation in 1972 what Stonewall was to its American predecessor in 1969. In its early period at least, he was responsible for much of its momentum, its theory, and its character.

Although he is still considered a founding father of homosexual liberation in France, Hocquenghem's relevance to contemporary homosexual issues and debates has only recently been reaffirmed, and only in very limited academic circles, through the proliferation of homosexual studies and queer theory programs on American and English campuses. Hocquenghem's relationship to the movements in France had always been a somewhat contentious one. After the break-up of the FHAR in 1974, the homosexual liberation movements, in his own rather harsh estimation, were coopted by consumerism and by the new political organizations of the Left, and thus emptied of their subversive potential. As the focus of the movements shifted increasingly inwards towards questions of culture and identity in the late 1970s, as opposed to outwards towards social revolution, Hocquenghem grew more distant and critical. "If we called ourselves a 'revolutionary homosexual action front'," Hocquenghem insisted in 1987,

⁵ Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). For more on Hocquenghem's contributions to homosexual movements and queer theory, see Bill Marshall, *Guy Hocquenghem: Beyond Gay Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

"it was because, for us, what was most essential was not homosexuality but revolutionary action. It was a way of saying not only that a revolutionary could be homosexual too, but that being homosexual might be the best way of being revolutionary."⁶ Gay and lesbian liberation, like most of France's new social movements, emerged as outgrowths of *gauchisme*, or radical leftism, after 1968 and shared in their early years the same revolutionary ideals and assumptions. Reflecting on his own so-called "coming out" article in *Le Nouvel Observateur* five years later, Hocquenghem noted that it was the only occasion on which he referred to "homosexuality" in the commonly understood meaning of the word. Everywhere else in his writings when he invoked "homosexuality"—a word that "still fills me with horror" he wrote in 1988—it was either "as a pretext to distance myself from it, or to warn against a false homosexual 'positivity'."⁷ Hocquenghem remained true, in short, to a radical vision of homosexual liberation that ran counter to the predominately reformist political mood in France that settled in after the turbulent early 1970s and that seemed to many to be counter-productive to the needs and goals of the homosexual community, especially after the onset of the AIDS epidemic.⁸

⁶ "Les premières lueurs du Fhar," (Interview with Hocquenghem) *Gai Pied Hebdo*, 12 March 1988, 32.

⁷ Guy Hocquenghem, *L'Amphithéâtre des morts: mémoires anticipées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 38. Guy Hocquenghem, *La Dérive homosexuelle* (Paris: Delarge, 1977), 23.

⁸ This is one of the underlying arguments of Frédéric Martel's history, *The Pink and the Black: Homosexuals in France since 1968*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). In his factually flawed, ideologically motivated account of responses to the AIDS epidemic in France, Martel blames the French homosexual community's residual radicalism from the days of the FHAR for its belated reaction to the threat of HIV, equating homosexual militancy

Aside from Hocquenghem's factious relationship with the homosexual movements, there are a number of other likely reasons for general neglect today in France. As a militant, critic, and polemist, Hocquenghem made few friends among France's small and powerful circles of cultural and literary elites. He epitomized a certain kind of social activist characteristic of the late 1960s and 1970s and common to the United States and Western Europe: the cultural revolutionary. In the United States, Abbie Hoffman perhaps best exemplified this kind of activist. "No one could raise a stink and attract attention to an issue with as few material sources—and with as much creative flair—as Abbie Hoffman," his biographer writes.⁹ Although the heyday of "happenings" and political theater ended after the early 1970s, Hocquenghem continued to practice the art of raising a stink through polemic, following in the footsteps of such great writers as Balzac, Proudhon, and Laurent Tailhade in a tradition as old as the Republic of Letters itself.

Hocquenghem lived by the dictum, succinctly expressed by the French situationist and kindred spirit Raoul Vaneigem, that "there is no such thing as a good

with social irresponsibility. Among the numerous factual errors and manipulations that discredit much of his work, Martel claims that Hocquenghem refused to test himself for AIDS and did not learn of his condition until he was already ill. This is false. Roland Surzur has the medical record establishing that Hocquenghem learned he was HIV positive in March 1985, not long, that is, after the test became available. For more criticisms of Martel's book, see Douglas Ireland, "The French Act Up," *The Nation*, 16 April 2001; Hélène Hazera, "Petites prouesses avec des morts: 'Le rose et le noir,'" *Libération*, 30 May 1996; and La Veuve Cycliste, "Martel en tête, pas en mémoire," *La Revue h* 1 (1996): 44.

⁹ Marty Jezer, *Abbie Hoffman American Rebel* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), xiii.

usage or a bad usage of the freedom of speech, only an insufficient usage."¹⁰ Words to Hocquenghem, as a militant close to him once put it, were like Kleenex, to be used and thrown out as needed.¹¹ As a writer and journalist, he had an impulsive habit of firing up controversy everywhere he went, surprising and sometimes angering even those closest to him, and he often burned his bridges behind him. His attitude towards journalism reflected this approach: "A newspaper that respects the complacency and tranquility of its readers? That's for hospitals and retirement homes!"¹² He also paid a steep price for his words. In 1986, for example, he published the *Open Letter to those who Traded Maoism for the Rotary Club*, accusing his former comrades of May by name—André Glucksmann, Bernard Kouchner, and Serge July among others—of reneging on their revolutionary promises and becoming that which they despised most in their youth: bourgeois conformists, unscrupulous careerists, and petty seekers of power and wealth.¹³ Of the revolutionary conflagration Hocquenghem helped them stoke in 1968 only ashes remained in the 1980s, and paradoxically, it was they, the ex-Maoists turned courtiers of the "Mitterrand Restoration," and not the Gaullist reactionaries who had put out the flames. When the *Open Letter* appeared, not one of its main targets responded. Instead, on behalf of the numerous affronted

¹⁰ Raoul Vaneigem, *Rien n'est sacré, tout peut se dire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003), 15.

¹¹ See Élisabeth Salvaresi's portrait, "Guy Hocquenghem," in *Mai en héritage* (Paris: Syros, 1988), 19-26.

¹² Hocquenghem, *Gai Pied Hebdo* (13 July 1985), quoted in Jean Le Bitoux, *Citoyen de seconde zone: Trente ans de lutte pour la reconnaissance de l'homosexualité en France (1971-2002)* (Paris: Hachette, 2003), 175.

¹³ Guy Hocquenghem, *Lettre ouverte à ceux qui sont passés du col Mao au Rotary*, intro. Serge Halimi (Marseille: Agone, 2003).

parties, *Libération* editorialist Jean-Michel Helvig effectively pre-empted any further debate by denouncing the pamphlet as a hateful harangue worthy of the anti-Semitic extreme right critics of the 1930s.¹⁴ When he was later invited to defend the *Open Letter on Apostrophes*, the prestigious political and cultural debate program hosted by Bernard Pivot and the launching pad for aspiring intellectual celebrities, Hocquenghem took the occasion to flay a panel of some of France's most influential print editors, the very same men who had the power to decide his career.¹⁵ Anyone who had been following his fortunes in the 1980s could only marvel at his astonishing lack of circumspection. Of the many things that interested Hocquenghem throughout his lifetime, a career was never one of them.

Moreover, Hocquenghem cultivated a critical perspective founded on his '68 idealism that was, in almost every respect, out of step with the political and philosophical zeitgeist of the late 1970s and 1980s. His critical perspective is best characterized not as Marxist or *gauchiste*, but utopian, though it drew as much from his own life experiences and his historical sensibility as it did from the utopian philosophical tradition in the West. Hocquenghem may have used words recklessly, but he was not a rebel without a cause. In the first few years following May 1968, he militated among a milieu of utopian *gauchistes* who demanded everything: "What we want: Everything!" (*Ce que nous voulons: Tout!*) was their slogan. One of the conclusions they drew from the failures of the 1968 student-worker uprising was that the revolution of the cultural sphere could not wait until after the workers'

¹⁴ Jean-Michel Helvig, *Libération*, 1 June 1986.

¹⁵ This episode is recounted by Laurent Joffrin, "Guy Hocquenghem, la mort de l'ange," *Libération*, 30 Aug. 1988.

revolution. Following the Marxist logic of Mao Tse-Tung's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution but more in the spirit of the counter-cultural movements of the American west coast, they sought nothing less than the total revolution of French society in the three or four years immediately following May '68.

In the second half of the 1970s, however, the political mood in France took a 180-degree turn. With the revelations of the gulags in the Soviet Union, the killing fields in Cambodia, and numerous other human catastrophes committed by Communist regimes around the globe, Marxism, "the unsurpassable horizon of our times" as Sartre famously described it a generation earlier, was widely abandoned. Like the proverbial baby in the bath water, with Marxism too went the very idea of utopia. The collective shock of these revelations, which the French historian François Dosse has referred to as the "Gulag Effect," also spurred what became known as the "New Philosophy," a loosely-unified school of political philosophers, most of them former *gauchistes* of one stripe or another, committed to political liberalism, human rights, and, above all, austerity in political thought.¹⁶ But France's liberal renaissance beginning in the late 1970s ran much deeper than just its political traditions; just about every aspect of French thought, politics, and society—from the

¹⁶ On the Gulag effect, see François Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, vol. 2, *The Sign Sets, 1967-Present*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 269-75. On the transformation of French intellectual and political culture in the 1980s and the rise of "New Philosophy," see Sunil Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution: The Intellectual Left in Postwar France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) and Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York: Berghahn, 2003).

French Revolution, to the French state and France's philosophical roots—was suddenly re-examined.¹⁷

Against the boundless optimism of France's new social activists of the late 1970s and 1980s and against the gloom and doom of the New Philosophers, Hocquenghem always maintained a critical distance. By the end of the 1970s, he was well aware that he had participated in one of the most extraordinary cultural transformations in the history of Western civilization. Though it may have been a failure in the short term, May '68 catalyzed massive institutional reforms, beginning with, perhaps most significantly, France's outdated educational system. Furthermore, May '68 and the years of revolutionary fermentation that followed gave birth to the array of new social movements, such as women's and homosexual liberation, ecology, and anti-racism and anti-discrimination campaigns, which would completely reshape the landscape of French politics within the span of a decade. Never before in the history of mankind had homosexuals, to take one example, enjoyed as much freedom, security, and acceptance. As the pre-eminent French sociologist Henri Mendras described Hocquenghem and the FHAR in a recent work: "[what began as] . . . a revolt of homosexuals led to a rapid and complete reversal of the majority of French people's attitudes towards homosexuality, and, consequently towards the differences of the Other."¹⁸

Yet Hocquenghem remained skeptical, first because homophobia, under new guises, was still alive and well in

¹⁷ For an introduction to and some representative examples of "new" French liberal thought in the 1980s, see Mark Lilla, ed., *New French Thought: Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Henri Mendras, *Français, comme vous avez changé* (Paris: Tallandier, 2004), 122.

France. Hocquenghem was in attendance at one of the first gay and lesbian film festivals in Paris in 1978 when a well-organized commando of neo-fascist youths attacked the famous "Pagoda" movie house on the Left Bank, beating spectators with clubs and badly damaging the facilities—an event that portended the rise of the then little-known neo-fascist New Right.¹⁹ In 1982, he watched helplessly as a number of his friends were dragged through the mud by the media over a "pedophile scandal" known as the "Coral Affair." In October 1982, three teachers at the Coral, a school for mildly handicapped children in the south of France, were accused of committing indecent acts with young boys. Impelled by conservative politicians, the media immediately pounced, transforming the affair into a witch-hunt for members of a supposed pedophile ring operating throughout the entire country. It was not until forged documents implicating such luminaries as Michel Foucault and Minister of Culture Jack Lang emerged that the media quietly admitted that whole thing had been a fabrication, timed perfectly to coincide with the extremely controversial—not to mention belated—repeal in 1982 of the Vichy-era laws discriminating against homosexuals.²⁰

But the greatest backlash had yet to come. Not long after its discovery in the United States, AIDS, the "gay cancer" as French papers regularly referred to it in the early 1980s, struck France. For the reactionary right in the 1980s,

¹⁹ On the attack on the Pagoda see Elisabeth Lebovici's interview with filmmaker Lionel Soukaz, "L'experimental, c'est un préférence, comme le sexe," *Libération Cinéma*, 4 Dec. 2002.

²⁰ For an excellent dossier on the Coral Affair and its press coverage, see *Gai Pied Hebdo* 45 (27 Nov. 1982). See also *Gai Pied Hebdo* 46 (4 Dec. 1982), 57 (19 Feb. 1983), and 59 (5 March 1983). Hocquenghem also wrote a *roman à clef* about the affair, originally serialized in *Gai Pied Hebdo* and later published as *Les Petits Garçons* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1983).

AIDS became a metaphor for the immorality of French youth raised by the '68ers—the "mental AIDS" (*sida mental*) in the unfortunate turn of phrase coined by *Figaro Magazine* editor Louis Pauwels. As Hocquenghem observed in 1988, "AIDS is no longer considered a misfortune, but a punishment; the social ill that brought down the terror, an invention of heaven in all its fury to punish the crimes of the earth."²¹ With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to make speculations about whether or not the French homosexual movements—which were somewhat slow to develop an organized response to the threat in comparison to their American counterparts—were poorly served by their militant *gauchiste* origins.²² Although the French homosexual community in the early 1980s seemed well prepared for a moral backlash, AIDS was the catastrophe that absolutely no one could have foreseen. In the tragic history of France's response to the AIDS threat in the 1980s, marked by blunders, missteps, and confusions, there are very few heroes and very few villains but numerous victims.²³ It could only be described as a tragic irony of history that AIDS arrived in Paris only months after the last vestiges of anti-homosexual legislation had been erased and homosexuals were suddenly freer than they had ever been to pursue their desires. What is certain is that the epidemic and the moral backlash it triggered completely and irreversibly transformed the homosexual community and the landscape of sexual politics in France. Hocquenghem was reluctant to

²¹ Hocquenghem, "Monsieur le sexe et madame la mort," *Figaro-Magazine*, 28 Feb. 1987, 18.

²² See Martel, chap. 10.

²³ For the history of the French response to AIDS, see Le Bitoux and Patrice Pinell, eds., *Une Épidémie politique: la lutte contre le sida en France: 1981-1986* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002).

assume the role of AIDS victim in the media as numerous celebrities before him had, although he never publicly denied he was infected either. Despite this reticence, the AIDS catastrophe was clearly a central pre-occupation in his later writings.²⁴

Beyond the events of his own lifetime, Hocquenghem also sought to gain a broader historical perspective on the transformations in French society of the 1970s and 1980s. Already in 1972, about four years before Michel Foucault embarked on his projected three-volume history of sexuality, he had described homosexuality in *Homosexual Desire* not as an existential truth but as a recent invention, a product of the medical and criminological discourses of European society in the late nineteenth century. In important contrast with Foucault, however, Hocquenghem—who was at the time strongly under the influence of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which had appeared just months earlier—still maintained that somewhere beneath the discursive construction of homosexuality there lay the polymorphous and kaleidoscopic plenum of "desire." Although it has often been assumed that Foucault had *Homosexual Desire* specifically in mind when he attacked the liberationist ethos in volume one of the *History of Sexuality*, his history of

²⁴ For example, although Hocquenghem rarely referred to the disease by name, it is the main subject of one of his last novels, *Eve* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987) in which the protagonist, Adam, is dying a slow death from "la maladie de Rozenbaum." (Willy Rozenbaum was one of the French doctors who first identified the virus and who personally cared for Hocquenghem during his long stays in the hospital in 1987 and 1988.)

sexuality was actually more indebted to its precursor than it was a departure from it.²⁵

In the late 1970s, Hocquenghem returned to the question of homosexuality's history, this time from a more scholarly than militant perspective, and in 1979 he published one of the first histories of homosexuality, entitled *Race d'Ep!: un siècle d'images d'homosexualité*.²⁶ With the collaboration of filmmaker Lionel Soukaz, *Race d'Ep!* was also made into a film that was immediately censored.²⁷ Beginning with the coinage of the term "homosexual" by German doctors in the 1860s, *Race d'Ep!* traces the evolution of ideas and images of homosexuality, and, in turn, the evolution of homosexuals, through a series of historical vignettes: Baron von Gloedden's turn of the century erotic photography, the German physician Magnus Hirshfeld's humanist homosexual movement in 1930s Berlin, the persecution of homosexuals by the Nazis and the Soviet Union, and, finally, the re-birth of homosexual culture in the European capitals in the late 1970s. One of the underlying ironies of his narrative is that the same images and stereotypes used to promote the humane treatment of homosexuals in early nineteenth-century Europe were later used for the sake of persecution by dictatorial regimes in the 1940s, a persecution so bloody that it took almost another thirty years for a vibrant

²⁵ On the relationship between Foucault and Hocquenghem's thoughts on homosexuality, see Didier Eribon, *Réflexions sur la question gay* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), part 3.

²⁶ Guy Hocquenghem and Lionel Soukaz, *Race d'Ep!: Un siècle d'images de l'homosexualité* (Paris: Hallier, 1979). *Race d'ep* is French backslang for *pédéraste*, a common slur for "homosexual."

²⁷ Michel Foucault later led a successful petition to declassify the film's original "X" rating. For a brief history of the film "Race d'Ep!", see Olivier Seguret, "'Race d'Ep!' rase les rayons," *Libération*, 10 July 1996.

homosexual culture to re-emerge. But as Hocquenghem often pointed out, not without a dose of nostalgia at times, the new homosexual culture of the 1970s centered around urban gay neighborhoods, though in many respects more open and more liberating than anything that had come before it, lacked something of the baroque richness of the homosexual underworlds of the turn the century, the sophistication of Berlin homosexual life in the 1930s, or even the solidarity of the occult homophile organizations of the 1950s. For Hocquenghem, the rich, tenebrous homosexual worlds of the past pointed to an infinity of other avenues for the expression of human desire and human fellowship—not just for homosexuals—avenues that were slowly being blocked for the sake of bourgeois respectability.

Finally, from a still wider philosophical perspective Hocquenghem continued to view the events of the 1970s and 1980s through the lens of his '68 utopian idealism. While the utopian spirit that motivated the students of May '68 inevitably died within a few years as it grew increasingly clear that another May '68 was not going to erupt, the theme of utopia continued to permeate everything Hocquenghem wrote. Even when he became ill in the 1980s, withdrew somewhat from the public eye, and began focusing his energies on literature, the theme of utopia was ever-present, whether the setting for his fiction was the complex origins of Christianity, the European discovery of the New World, or the teeming homosexual underworlds of Paris, New York, and Rio de Janeiro.

The utopian experiment always looming in the background was the one Hocquenghem experienced firsthand: the aborted utopia of May 1968. When the student movements exploded in May '68 in Paris, he hazarded an early attempt to give them meaning and

direction in the first new publication of the '68 generation, *Action*. In "Why we struggle" (*Pourquoi nous nous battons*), the centerpiece of *Action*'s inaugural issue, he described something close to what Herbert Marcuse had referred to a few years earlier in *One Dimensional Man* as a "great refusal" beginning to emerge. "The youth of 1968," Hocquenghem wrote, "refuse the future that the existing society offers them. . . . And when they revolt with violence, they are conscious that they are rendering this refusal more visible and clear."²⁸ A couple of weeks later, the momentum of the uprising shifted dramatically from the students to the striking workers, and the primary task of the student movements, heavily influenced by the Marxist discourses of the day, became that of unifying their struggle with that of the workers. Hocquenghem, too, was swept up in this populist enthusiasm, and after the uprising crumbled in June and July with the re-emergence of a victorious Charles de Gaulle and an end to the workers' strikes brokered by Prime Minister Georges Pompidou, he drifted through a number of different *gauchiste* circles before helping to found the FHAR in 1971.

The moment of the revolt that marked him the most, however, was that initial euphoric gesture of refusal, which he extolled in his memoirs as the first time "humanity, in its long history, ceased to be afraid . . . a parenthesis in the history of man when the ancient fears, culpabilities, and self-limitations receded slightly."²⁹ In the first two or three years following the uprising, he sought to reanimate that same spirit within the *gauchiste* movements, even as these

²⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), esp. chap. 10. "Pourquoi nous nous battons," *Action* 1 (7 May 1968), repr. in Guy Hocquenghem, *L'Après-mai des faunes* (Paris: Grasset, 1974), 45.

²⁹ Hocquenghem, *L'Amphithéâtre des morts*, 27-28.

movements were becoming more and more ideologically and organizationally streamlined and in some cases, such as the Maoist Proletarian Left, increasingly violent in their rhetoric and actions. By 1972 he had completely given up on the *gauchistes*, although he still identified himself as a leftist of sorts, albeit of a counter-cultural bent—"a Marxist of the Groucho wing" (*Marxiste tendance Groucho*), to use a situationist expression. In the 1980s, however, when the former '68ers jumped on Mitterrand's bandwagon, he decided to completely write off his generation and to do so with style. The real danger posed by the "Maoist-turned-Rotarians," Hocquenghem argued in the *Open Letter*, stemmed less from their conversion to the liberal consensus than from the way in which they converted; possessed by the same doctrinaire zeal with which they once preached revolution, they exploited their credentials as '68ers to impose their vision of politics on future generations, silencing their demands and censoring their imaginations. If few paid attention to the *Open Letter* when it appeared, still fewer noticed its philosophical companion text, published the same year, written in collaboration with his former philosophy professor and life-long friend René Schérer, and entitled *L'Âme atomique*. ("Atomic Soul"—a pun on "atomic weapon," *l'arme atomique* in French). *L'Âme atomique* begins with the observation that in modern French society "the fear of the end of the world prohibits reflection about the ends of this world."³⁰ Weaving through two millennia of utopian thought in the West, Hocquenghem and Schérer investigate the possibilities for restoring "soul" to Cold War Europe, a civilization still reeling from the horrors of the twentieth century and paralyzed by the fear of the bomb and ecological disaster.

³⁰ Guy Hocquenghem and René Schérer, *L'Âme atomique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1986), 315.

Hocquenghem's humorous satire in the *Open Letter* and his philosophical musings in *L'Âme atomique* are really two sides of the same critical perspective. In an essay on aesthetics, Hocquenghem explains, for example, how his humor arises essentially out of a sense of "disgust" (*dégoût*). Far from being a simple case of aversion or nausea, the experience of disgust situates an individual in a state of profound disharmony with his surroundings. It is at the same time "noble, misanthropic, [and] comical . . . in short disgust is never just mournful, it is desperate or humorous."³¹ Like melancholy in Baudelaire's modernist aesthetics, disgust harbors both creative and destructive potential. Creating humor out of disgust was, for Hocquenghem, a form of the "heroism of modern life," to quote Baudelaire's famous phrase, a means of lifting oneself temporarily out of the muck of the modern world.³² But as Hocquenghem observed in 1987, the very capacity to experience disgust had already become a thing of the past. "The man with no disgust, capable of accepting everything . . . is the new fashion." Disgust today is reduced to "nothing more than a problem of stress or a case of the blues."³³

Humor, however, is only one potentiality of disgust. In its complete repulsion of the world as it is, disgust also creates a space for imagining it anew; it is, in other words, a condition for the possibility of utopian thinking. This connection first revealed itself to Hocquenghem in May

³¹ Guy Hocquenghem, "Le dégoût du siècle," *Traverses* 33-34 (1985): 76-77.

³² On Baudelaire's "melancholy" and "heroism of modern life" see Marshall Berman's foundational study of modernism, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 131-71.

³³ Hocquenghem, "Le dégoût du siècle," 76.

1968, when the Parisian students, united only in their "great refusal," rose up and occupied the Latin Quarter, transforming it into a microcosm of the society in which they wanted to live. For Hocquenghem and Schérer in *L'Âme atomique*, the philosophy of utopia for the modern world passes not through Lenin, Marx, or Mao, but through Lucretius, Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, and, especially, Charles Fourier. Fourier's philosophy had been an important influence on the French avant-garde since his rediscovery by André Breton and the Surrealists in the 1940s, and in 1966, Fourier's personal notes, long thought to have been destroyed, suddenly resurfaced in Paris, leading to the publication of *Le Nouveau Monde amoureux*, a biting polemic against the sacred ideas of love and marriage.³⁴ Fourier's writings had long occupied a central place in Hocquenghem's thought, and *Le Nouveau Monde amoureux* arrived just in time for the sexual revolution in France. As he had argued against the *gauchistes* in 1972, "We should not consider Fourier as a 'precursor' in the terrain opened up by Marx. It is, rather, the reverse that rings more true. We should view Marx as someone who explored only one aspect, albeit admirably so, of a philosophical terrain inaugurated by Fourier."³⁵ In other words, Marx explored almost unilaterally the political dimension of utopia, leaving aside what Hocquenghem and Schérer, borrowing from Fourier, variously referred to as "domestic utopia" or the "utopia of everyday life." In Fourier, the ideal political order is not a model to be constructed or imposed on humans, but the natural outgrowth of humans as they already exist in their everyday lives, their everyday relationships, and their everyday

³⁴ Charles Fourier, *Le Nouveau Monde amoureux* (Paris: Anthropos, 1966).

³⁵ Hocquenghem, "Fourier," in *L'Après-mai des faunes*, 65.

desires—that is, when false constraints, such as the nuclear family and monogamy to cite a couple of Fourier's bugaboos, are stripped away. For Fourier, political utopia thus arose organically out of domestic utopia and was, therefore, of secondary importance. Similarly, for Hocquenghem and Schérer utopia was essentially apolitical and a-teleological, that is, not "the end of history," or something to work towards, but as they sometimes described it, an obligation (*exigence*).

Utopia . . . is an "obligation" not an "end." The "obligation" is not the absorption of the utopia into the real, but the penetration of the real by utopia. Utopia is not something to be anticipated, a simulation of what is to come. In suggesting or hinting at possibilities outside of the realm of the probable, it reorients the real, deters the real from limiting itself, closing in on itself. But at the same time, it forbids its own realization.³⁶

If Hocquenghem continued to view the events of his lifetime with disgust, that profound sense of disaccord with the world as he described it, his attitude was not therefore one of total rejection or nihilism, as his critics often charged. His pessimism was, rather, the kind of active pessimism that Walter Benjamin a generation earlier had observed in Nietzsche, Charles Fourier, and Charles Baudelaire. For Benjamin, in active forms of pessimism there exists a germ of lucidity, an openness to the possibility of utopia that is inscribed in every generation, at every moment.³⁷ In the 1940s, as Europe in its darkest

³⁶ René Schérer, with the collaboration of Guy Hocquenghem, *Pari sur l'impossible* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1989), 7.

³⁷ See, for example, Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 155-200. For more on Benjamin's utopianism, see

hours was contemplating a Nazi "reign of one thousand years," Walter Benjamin set down to paper what was to be History."³⁸ Several months later he committed suicide while trying to cross the Spanish border from France in flight from the Nazis. Curiously, instead of taking aim at the fascists in his eighteen theses, he seemed more concerned with criticizing Germany's reformist Social Democratic party. Blinded by their narrow faith in progress, the Social Democrats, he argued, had lost sight of the genuine "revolutionary experience," a kind of experience Benjamin could only describe in the encrypted form of his famous theological fragments. Much like Benjamin in the 1930s, Hocquenghem in the 1980s was temperamentally averse to the political zeitgeist of the times that preached reformism and gradualism. Hocquenghem's critique of progress was not, however, a complete rejection of its achievements but instead a recognition of incompleteness, its inability, in and of itself, to bring about revolutionary change. According to Benjamin, the key lesson for the workers' movements of his age was that capitalism will die no natural death. Neither will bourgeois values, Hocquenghem might have added.

Is there something worthy of redemption in the utopian idealism Hocquenghem once shared with his former comrades, the "Maoists-turned-Rotarians," either for modern gay and lesbian activists or movements for progressive social change in general? Or was Hocquenghem simply unable or unwilling to let go of the romantic visions of youth? It may be true, as Jean-Michel Helvig wrote in his scurrilous attack on Hocquenghem on the occasion of the *Open Letter's* publication, that

Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetics of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), particularly chap. 8.

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, 253-64.

"[c]elebrating a fidelity to one's ideas is not necessarily an ode to the intelligence of time."³⁹ On the other hand, for the generation that is perhaps better known in France today not for having built the barricades of May but for having rebuilt their careers in the late 1970s and 1980s as "New Philosophers," anti-communists, and neo-liberals, self-renunciation is not necessarily a mark of sophistication either. Hocquenghem was an idealist, but he was not so obviously idealistic that he rejected the enormous achievements of the Left's social and cultural agenda in the late 1970s under Giscard or in the 1980s under Mitterrand. Hocquenghem continued to collaborate with reformist social movements throughout his lifetime, albeit somewhat inconsistently and always on his own terms. Without that initial experience of disgust, however, and the utopian spirit that characterized the early student movements, he believed that something vital had been lost. In the *Open Letter* Hocquenghem charged that French intellectuals in the late 1970s and 1980s not only abrogated their utopian "obligation," but that they had also nearly succeeded in quelling the utopian energies of the increasingly alienated younger generation. This was the underlying message of both the *Open Letter* and *L'Âme atomique*: when France's "New Philosophers" exhorted humility in political thought as the best safeguard against catastrophe, Hocquenghem tried to warn against an overdose of their medicine.

³⁹ Helvig, 11.